

JULY 10, 1980

A 15-day heat wave has turned Texas into a tourist's conception of our state. Day after day of readings above the hundred mark have scalded the cities and bakes the grasslands.

The first week of the heat spell was ignored in the Shortgrass Country. Winter and spring had wrecked the herders to the point that adverse weather was accepted. The people's reaction to what was turning into a catastrophe was numbed by the hardships of the past two seasons. Doomsday preaching weathermen had a difficult time convincing anyone that the grass the short spring had revived was going into nature's oven.

I've been afraid that was going to happen to the ranchers, especially the woolie operators. Coyote-loving environmentalists and government agencies determined to spread misery have trampled the sheep men down so thoroughly that the question was not who was going to put out the fire, it was who was going to bother to call the fire engine.

Old circus hands claim they can predict fate by watching the performers around their dressing rooms. Signs like the lead men on the high wire act letting his shoe laces get old without bothering to replace them, or the lion tamer allowing his wife to pick out his chairs and check the poppers on his whips. Climbing up and down shaky grandstands selling all that near-toxic hot dog mess gives the big top hands a closer understanding of death. Those hombres are better hands at calling the life span than the insurance actuaries are.

I'm sure you've seen cattle traders acting the same way during big market failures. After about 40 straight sales days of red ink, you'll see those guys jaywalk in traffic so thick the asphalt has lost it's traction. Just avoiding their pickups alone is a major undertaking. I used to dread to be at the auction as a sale ended. I see safer drivers than that every morning at the Post Office in Mertzon, and Mertzon is respected statewide as being the country's most dangerous town to pass through at mail call.

What happens is that the nerves wear out. Once I started overhearing the sheepherders talking about the wolf packs in the same light a couple of old women discuss the candlebug problem around their porch lights, I knew the fraternity had sustained all the shock the human system will withstand.

Fifty years ago, one wolfslide under a fence was enough to mount up a posse of armed ranchers. Nowadays, burdened by the laws destroying food and fiber, organizing a band of your neighbors to ride in their pickups is hard to rally.

I think we need a reverse method of acupuncture to shoot some life back in our beings. I get some big ideas on how to fight off the packs, but about the time they formulate it always seems to be time for my afternoon nap.

Our old granddads fought hard for this land. Not in as dramatic a sense as Abe Lincoln splitting rails or the German settlers hauling rocks for their fences, but hard enough that the Indians and the predators knew that these greybeards were serious adversaries.

I figure that about every 20 years we have to fight to keep our land. If we ever miss the call to arms, the second chance may not come.

The heat must be working underneath my hairline. Counting the days and reading the thermometer won't change the tide. Look for a good fall and a short winter. I'm going to pay closer attention to the cities the next time one comes to town.